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THE INFORMERS OF NINETY-EIGHT.

BY I. A. TAYLOR.

THERE is one figure which, like a shabby and sordid Mephistopheles, is never long absent from the scene of Irish politics—the figure of the informer. Ireland has always been a country of contrasts, and especially at the close of the last century nothing is more striking than that presented by the extreme heroism of loyalty on the one side, and cold-blooded and deliberate treachery on the other ; by the unshaken fidelity of men to whom a breach of faith would have signified the exchange of poverty or want for actual riches, and repeated and premeditated betrayal of trust on the part of those whose position might have seemed a guarantee of integrity. The story is well known of the escape of Hamilton Rowan, when a couple of boatmen, with the very handbills in their possession which offered a thousand pounds for his apprehension, carried him safely over to France ; while on another occasion not only did three militia soldiers, condemned to death as United Irishmen, choose rather to die than to purchase life by the betrayal of their comrades, but the father of one of them, urged to use his influence with his son, declared he would shoot him himself sooner than see him turn informer.

But while these are nothing more than examples of the spirit by which a large part of the population was animated, there existed no less by the side of it the trade, systematically and unscrupulously carried on, of the informer—a trade sedulously fostered and encouraged by the English Government, and to which may be traced much of the alleged sympathy with crime and genuine reluctance to lend a hand in bringing the criminal to justice which has been so often used as a reproach against the Irish people. It is not astonishing that a people noted for its instincts of generosity should have elected to leave

the work of government to be performed by its hired instruments, and should have shrunk from so much as a semblance of participation in the traffic.

The indiscriminate horror which was entertained with regard to those, whether innocent or guilty, who were convicted of co-operation with the natural enemies of their race—unfortunately identified with the administration of that which went by the name of justice—is curiously and signally illustrated by an incident which took place towards the end of the seventeenth century. Two sisters named Kennedy—mere children of fourteen or fifteen years old—who had the reputation of being heiresses, were carried off from their home by a gang of ruffians, to two of whom they were forcibly married. When, some weeks later, the men were caught and brought to trial, the unfortunate girls were induced to bear witness against their captors, their consent to do so being, it is said, chiefly due to a desire to revenge a brutal blow bestowed upon one of them. The result of the trial was the hanging of the men and the pensioning of their victims. But so passionately opposed was public sentiment, even in this instance, to the character of the approver, that demonstrations of hostility greeted the unhappy sisters whenever they ventured to show their faces; that when they subsequently married, the misfortunes by which one of them was pursued were regarded by the people in the light of a judgment upon her; and, stranger still, the husband of the other was infected to such a degree by the popular superstition as to imagine himself haunted by the spectre of his dead rival and never dared to sleep without a light in his room!

Another example, illustrative of the brutality engendered by the loathing of the trade, is furnished by a story told in after years by an aged lady, Mrs. O'Byrne; who remembered throughout her life—as well she might—a visit paid as a child to the Anatomical Museum of Trinity College, Dublin, for the purpose of witnessing a dance, executed by means of a system of pulleys, by the skeleton of the informer, Jemmy O'Brien. The husband of the servant who conducted her little charge to this ghastly entertainment had, it seemed, been done to death by O'Brien; and she took a grim pleasure in the show.

Taking into account this condition of public feeling, it may be allowed that the position of the paid spy was not without its

disadvantages, and that by the more timorous their wages were not altogether lightly earned.

Among the motley crowd which went to make up the profession—men of whom Lord Moira publicly and solemnly declared that he shuddered to think that such wretches could find employment or protection under any government—every variety was present. There was the unscrupulous and cold-blooded detective, who deliberately insinuated himself into the confidence of his comrades in order to sell them to their enemies—who, to quote Curran's scathing invective, "measured his value by the coffins of his victims, and in the field of evidence appreciated his fame as the Indian warrior does in fight, by the number of scalps with which he can swell his triumphs;" there was the common informer, chosen from the lowest ranks, to whom treachery was merely a means, like any other, of gaining a livelihood; there was the gentleman of birth and breeding, in whose case conscience, or what stood for it, smoothed the path of treason and a sense of duty was made to play a leading, and gain a secondary, part; there was the artist to whom dexterity in his craft afforded positive satisfaction, and who appeared to heap lie upon lie for the mere pleasure of the performance; there were those in whom the sense of honor, not yet wholly extinct, made itself from time to time uneasily felt; and finally there were not wanting cases in which the traitor, like Judas, repented too late, and did his best to expiate his treachery. Thus an Englishman named Bird, through whose instrumentality quite a number of obnoxious persons had been committed to prison, sickened of his trade, threw it up in disgust, and published an account of his transactions with the Castle; whilst Newell, another of the brotherhood, in a curious letter to his employer, the Under Secretary Cooke, accused him, not without a touch of dramatic skill, of his own moral ruin.

"Though I cannot deny being a villain," he said, "I hope clearly to prove that I had the honor of being made one by you."

These, however, were the exceptions. The majority, and especially, curiously enough, those of education among the body, seem to have performed their task with little hindrance from a too delicate sense of honor. It was a time when, under the influence of panic and excitement, the laws commonly regulating the conduct of gentlemen were treated with strange disregard. Witness the scene in court when Lord Kingston came

forward to give evidence against the very man to whom he owed his own safety, citing that circumstance itself as a proof of the influence possessed by his benefactor among the rebels, and eliciting a devout thanksgiving from a gentleman in the crowd that he, for his part, could be charged with having saved no man's life. Nor could a stronger instance be found than that furnished by Captain Armstrong who, with the explicit and emphatic approval of his brother officers, gained the confidence of the unfortunate Sheares brothers, acquired possession of their secrets, wound up by dining with them and their family on the eve of their arrest—a proceeding with regard to which even Armstrong himself entertained scruples, removed by Lord Castlereagh—and delivered them over on the following day to the vengeance of the government. On another occasion, too, we find an English gentleman, mistaken on the street by an United Irishman for one of the rebel leaders, not only encouraging the misapprehension in the hope of obtaining useful information, but giving ingenious expression to his regret that he was not in a position to forge the handwriting of the man whose character he had assumed. Such being the practices which were in fashion, and the prevailing indifference to the ordinary codes of honor, it was not unnatural that every one should look upon his neighbor with distrust ; and it scarcely surprises one to find men acquitted by posterity of any shadow of guilt suspected by their contemporaries of treachery.

Leaving on one side, however, the lesser villains who made up the rank and file of the “Battalion of Testimony”—the name by which the body was known—there are four men who played a principal part amongst the informers of Ninety-eight who may be accepted as sufficiently representative of their profession to give a fair idea of the classes from which were drawn the government recruits. These are : Leonard McNally, pre-eminently the artist of his craft and one of the most singular figures of his time ; Thomas Reynolds, the man of principles and scruples ; Francis Higgins, the type of the low and successful adventurer ; and lastly Magan, the Catholic barrister, driven to his crime by stress of financial difficulty, and combining with his treason an incongruous vein of uprightness.

While none of the four are devoid of interest, it is undoubtedly McNally who in this respect bears away the palm.

In his hands treachery became a fine art, nor is it possible to withhold from him his meed of admiration.

Uniting the profession of a playwright to his other avocations, the elaboration of a plot upon the world's stage may be imagined to have contained for him a special interest; while possessing in his own person histrionic gifts of no common order, the dramatic element is strongly present in his treatment of the part he set himself, always behind the scenes, to play.

Called both to the English and Irish bars, his Nationalist sympathies had been so strong that, as a member of the United Irish body, he had fought a duel with Sir Jonah Barrington in vindication of its honor; and trusted to the full by the Nationalist leaders, of whom his house was a centre in Dublin, he was in every way qualified to become a useful government tool, when, in or before the year 1794, he accepted that office, continuing to fill it with unexampled and almost incredible success, until his death, nearly thirty years later. Before '98, through the troubled times of the rebellion itself, and afterward, he carried on his trade, wholly unsuspected till the end.

It was in his dealings with poor Jackson, that clergyman of doubtful repute, that McNally's first laurels in the field of the informer seem to have been won. A genial and sociable man—it was afterwards part of his duty to entertain the National leaders at the government's expense—he inaugurated his career by a dinner given in honor of his victim, and the success with which he eluded suspicion is proved by the will afterwards signed by Jackson in prison, “in presence of my dearest friend, Leonard McNally”; a document which was duly handed over by the latter to the authorities, so soon as that ghastly closing scene had taken place, when, on the judge proposing to defer passing sentence of death till the unconscious prisoner should be in a condition to understand it, it was found that that verdict had been already, not only pronounced, but executed in another court.

It was a successful beginning to McNally's career, and what followed was worthy of it. Again and again, as counsel for the men he had sold, he took briefs for their defense, pleading their cause with so much fervor and eloquence that on one occasion Curran himself was moved to tears. “My old and excellent friend,” exclaimed the great orator, while his emotion spread to the Bench, “I have long known and respected the honesty of

your heart, but never, until this occasion, was I acquainted with the extent of your abilities." Had Curran been in possession of the whole truth, he must have admitted that his friend's talents were even greater than he had imagined. During a period of no less than forty years not so much as an unkind look—we have his son's authority for it—passed between the two, and death found their intimacy unbroken, not a suspicion of the double part played by his colleague having crossed Curran's mind.

In the tragedy of Ninety-eight itself the share taken by McNally was less conspicuous than that of others, his services being too important to make it desirable that he should come prominently forward. His special work was carried on underground, and of the completeness, the attention to details, with which it was performed, his dealings with Robert Emmet furnish an example. Having first sold the young man to the authorities, he proceeded to undertake his defense, and having vainly pleaded his cause in court, visited his unfortunate client in prison on the morning of his execution, in order to tender to him sympathy and consolation in the hour of his supreme necessity.

The mother of the young leader was just dead, but unaware of the fact, he expressed his longing to see her.

"There, Robert," replied McNally, pointing with dramatic effect to heaven—"there, Robert, you shall meet her this day."

A description of the interview was communicated to the newspapers, doubtless by McNally himself, proud of his part in it.

His death corresponded with his life. Having passed for a Protestant, he called in a priest when the end approached, received from him the sacraments of the Church, and so squared his accounts with heaven.

Thomas Reynolds, to whom was due the arrest of the Leinster Directory in March, '98, and who is therefore to be credited with the most crushing blow dealt at the conspiracy which culminated in the rebellion, presents a signal contrast to McNally, and was totally incapable of plying his trade with the light-heartedness and the enjoyment by which the lawyer was distinguished. Reynolds, on the contrary, went about his business heavily and with an air of middle-class respectability which, with the panegyric published by his son, lends itself, perhaps unfairly, to the suspicion of cant. He was too respectable to have a right to his vices.

And yet it is possible that he acted, in some measure at least, in good faith, nor can we but believe that Moore's dismissal of him as a worthless member of the conspiracy, pressed for money, is too summary a verdict. It would be curious could a dictionary be compiled of the synonyms invented by conscience, nor would the endeavor of the sinner to give a Christian name to his crime be destitute of pathos. Hypocrisy, dispassionately considered, is the one homage that a not inconsiderable fraction of humanity is capable of rendering to virtue, in the acknowledgement that it is more admirable than vice, nor is it well that a world, not immaculate itself in the matter of truth, should use undue severity towards those poor souls to whom the cloak has become their habitual garment.

Brought up by the Jesuits, Reynolds had started in life as a silk manufacturer, attaining, shortly before his change of front, and by means of some land leased from the Duke of Leinster, with whom he claimed distant kinship, to the position of a small country gentleman. His political antecedents were, from the popular point of view, unimpeachable, since he had been a member of the Catholic Committee, had represented Dublin in the Convention of '92, had recently been initiated into the Society of United Irishmen, though, if his son is to be credited, in ignorance of its revolutionary character, and was also—a further guarantee—married to the sister-in-law of Wolfe Tone.

This was the man who—also on his son's authority—was in '98 hailed as the saviour of his country, courted and caressed by all those not engaged in the rebellion, to whom wealth and honors were voted; but who, satisfied with having done his duty, declined them all, and who, honorable and upright public servant as he was, found himself later shaken off and discountenanced by the very persons, with one or two exceptions, by whom he had been employed; who retired to France to find consolation for their ingratitude in a small number of friends, and finally—it would seem in somewhat belated fashion—in the Friend who sticketh closer than a brother.

Thus far Mr. Thomas Reynolds, Jr., fired with filial enthusiasm. A less ornate account would describe his father as, though unquestionably an informer, not one of the lowest type, to whom treachery was a simple means of gain, but one in whose case conscience and scruples also played a part. It is undeniable

that five hundred guineas were paid to him by government, but a careful examination of evidence tends to prove that money was not his object, and that he was one of those persons who, finding themselves—perhaps involuntarily—in possession of facts they conceive it their duty to make known, lack courage to act openly, and having laid the foundation of their future career by the initial act of giving clandestine information, continue to invite the confidence of those they have betrayed for the purpose of using it against them.

It was in November of the year 1797 that this timid and vacillating gentleman was constrained, much against his will, to accept a post of importance in the confederacy, the pressure brought to bear upon the recruit being an instance of that imprudence on the part of the leaders of the enterprise which went far to justify the assertion of an Englishman, who observed to Grattan that, if he were to rebel, it should not be in the company of Irishmen, “for, by God, they are the worst rebels I ever heard of!”

Placed forthwith in a position of responsibility in the United Irish body, Reynolds learnt for the first time, according to his own account, its revolutionary character; and afraid either to rouse suspicion by severing his connection with the association or, by remaining in it, to co-operate with its designs, he adopted the middle course, of retaining his position in the character of a government agent.

Chancing to fall in, as a travelling companion, with a Mr. Cope, “in whose friendship and honor I had the most implicit confidence”—did Mr. Cope, one wonders, reciprocate the compliment?—he was induced to make certain disclosures which ultimately led to the arrest, on the eve of the rebellion, of the Leinster Directory.

Reynolds, unlike some others of his profession, was a man of one stroke, and his services to the government seem to have been limited to a comparatively short space of time. He must, however, have developed a certain talent for meeting the difficulties of his new position, and a curious story is told by which he appears to have displayed, at least on one occasion and in the stress of danger, a presence of mind and ready audacity with which one would not have credited him. It is related that, met at midnight by Neilson, a member of the conspiracy possessed of extraordinary physical strength and an excitability bordering on

madness, the informer was compelled by the latter, on whom some suspicion of the truth had dawned, to follow him to a dark passage in what were then the liberties of Dublin, where, presenting a pistol at his breast, he demanded of him what he should do to the villain who could insinuate himself into his confidence in order to betray him.

"You should shoot him through the heart," was Reynolds' reply, made with so much promptness and effrontery that Neilson, though his suspicions were not wholly removed, let the traitor go.

To Reynolds there must, in conclusion, be allowed the honor of having provided Curran with the opportunity of achieving a signal oratorical triumph.

"Some observations, but a few, upon the evidence of the informer I will make," said the great lawyer in the course of his speech against the Bill of Attainder brought against Lord Edward Fitzgerald after his death. "I do believe all he has admitted against himself. I do verily believe him in that instance, even though I heard him assert it on his oath—by his own confession an informer and a bribed informer—a man whom respectable witnesses had sworn in a court of justice upon their oath not to be credible upon his oath. See, therefore, if there is any one assertion to which credit can be given, except this—that he has sworn and forsworn that he is a traitor, that he has received five hundred guineas to be an informer, and that his general reputation is to be utterly unworthy of credit."

And yet, in taking leave of Mr. Reynolds, and in spite of Curran's passionate denunciation, it is impossible not to carry away an impression of respectable solidity; of regretful and reluctant treason; of a timorous sympathy with the men he betrayed, and—who knows?—possibly the answer of a good conscience.

Francis Higgins—better known as the Sham Squire—is, though too characteristic a specimen of his class and too important a member of it to be omitted from the picture, a simpler and perhaps less interesting personage than the remainder of the quartette. So far as it is possible to judge, he was a fair example of the low and unscrupulous adventurer, using whatever means came readiest to hand for the furtherance of his objects, nor are there to be traced in him any of those contradic-

tions which confront us in such men as Reynolds or Magan, and lend complexity and interest to their characters; while his villainies were of a coarser and grosser type than those of the artistic McNally.

Born in a Dublin cellar, he began life as a bare-footed pot boy, proceeding to occupy the position of an attorney's clerk, in which capacity his powers of caligraphy were developed to such an extent that he was enabled to execute with marked success certain forgeries, by which he was represented as a young gentleman of landed property and good expectations, in the enjoyment of a post under government. Armed with these credentials Mr. Higgins sought a well-known clergyman, Father John Austin, and made known to him his desire to become a member of the Roman Catholic Church, stipulating that his conversion should remain a secret, lest his father should, on account of it, disinherit him. The good priest, profoundly touched by the disinterestedness of the young neophyte in embracing a faith still proscribed by the penal laws, fell straightway into the trap, and not only received him into the church, but on the convert presently making known his further desire to secure a wife of the true faith who might lend firmness to his frail resolutions, introduced his *protegé* into the family of a well-to-do merchant, whose daughter, with her dower, shortly passed into his possession. It is not necessary to pursue Mr. Higgins throughout the successive stages of his career, the disastrous sequel to his marriage—his wife fled from him a few days after the wedding—the action brought against him by his enraged father-in-law for cheating by means of forged documents and perjury, and his consequent imprisonment of which he made use to obtain a second wife in the person of his jailer's daughter.

It was an opening which might have been expected to tell against his advancement in later life; but the government was not fastidious in the choice of its tools. As director of the policy of the *Freeman's Journal*, of which he became proprietor, Higgins was too valuable an auxiliary to be despised; and using his position discreetly to further the ends of government, he was soon enabled to take rank as a respectable member of society, became a justice of the peace, and drove in a gorgeous chariot about the streets with which he had been so closely acquainted in earlier days. Conscience, however, gives us many surprises, and

though one would have imagined that the Sham Squire might have deemed himself secure from its attacks, it would appear that even in the midst of his prosperity he was not exempt from disquieting reflections; and when preparing to cross St. George's Channel on a visit to England, he considered it well, before encountering the perils of the deep, to propitiate heaven by a will in which certain charitable bequests—to meet all contingencies—were distributed alike among Catholics and Protestants.

It was this person—not perhaps altogether properly classed as an informer, since he made no secret of his support of the government—who was stated by the Under-Secretary Cooke to have procured for him all the intelligence relating to Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and who, in fact, suborned Francis Magan to betray him. We cannot, in conclusion, do better than to quote the words of his epitaph.

“Reader,” says this remarkable production, after the enumeration of certain bequests, “you will judge of the head and heart which dictated such distinguished charity to his fellow-creatures, liberal as it is impartial, and acknowledge that he possesses that true benevolence which heaven ordains and never fails everlastingly to reward.” The reader no doubt *will* judge.

Francis Magan, Higgins' tool and instrument, to whom Lord Edward Fitzgerald's capture has at last been traced, was of quite another temper. A silent, reserved, and gloomy man, he was credited by his countrymen to the last with a sense of honor which was in singular contrast to his dealings with the government, and of which he appears in fact not to have been destitute with regard to other matters. There are men who divide their lives into separate departments, and those of honesty in one relation of life may not be incapable of lying or cheating in another. Francis Magan was a signal example of such inconsistencies. A barrister, but, unlike McNally, an unsuccessful one, there is little doubt that it was by pecuniary difficulties that he was driven to pursue the trade of an informer; and in Higgins' communications to government on the subject, continual pressure is brought to bear upon the authorities with regard to the payment of certain sums, without which he doubts his capacity of bringing his subordinates up to the point of betrayal. There is something incongruous in the position of the two men—Higgins, the patron; Magan, the tool; and it is impossible to

doubt that to the barrister, with a gentleman's education and some at least of the instincts of a man of honor, his relations with the ex-potboy, the convict and forger, must have been humiliating enough. It is also a curious fact that it appears possible that his ill-gotten gains went to discharge an obligation which a less scrupulous man might have ignored.

It is in the part played by Magan with regard to the apprehension of Lord Edward Fitzgerald that his figure alone detaches itself from the surrounding obscurity, he fell back into insignificance as soon as it was over. As a trusted member of the United Irish body in Dublin, so much confidence was placed in the taciturn and moody barrister, that it had been arranged by Miss Moore, at whose father's house the rebel leader had been secreted, that he should be transferred for greater safety to Magan's own, nor did the unsuccessful attempt of government, evidently acquainted with the plan, to seize the fugitive on his way to his fresh hiding place, suffice to open her eyes to the untrustworthiness of her confidant.

On the following morning, therefore, when Magan (who like the rest of the fraternity seems to have taken kindly to his part so soon as he was fairly launched in it), visited her for the purpose of ascertaining the reason of the non-appearance of his expected guest, she received him without suspicion, though noting his careworn and anxious aspect, natural enough in a needy man, seeing that a thousand pounds were at stake!

"I have been most uneasy," he told her. "Did anything happen? I waited up till one o'clock and Lord Edward did not come!"

Wholly unsuspecting of treachery, Miss Moore at once not only enlightened her visitor as to the occurrences of the previous night—of which he was likely enough in a position to have himself furnished her with an account—but bestowed upon him the further information he sought as to Lord Edward's present place of concealment. That very day the capture was effected; while shortly afterwards a bond of a thousand pounds, due from himself and his father, who had become insolvent, was paid to the creditors by Mr. Francis Magan.

At the time when Miss Moore related the facts, Magan's guilt had not yet been clearly proved, but her own conclusion was plain.

"If Magan is innocent" she said with the bitterness of a friend

who had trusted and been deceived, "then I am the informer," since they two had alone at the moment been in a position to betray the fugitive.

During his lifetime his guilt was never brought home to him, and gloomy and silent as before he continued to enjoy the confidence and the esteem, if not the affection, of his fellow-citizens. In his testamentary dispositions—for he had his vein of religion and had been in the habit of bestowing liberal alms—he made careful provision, like Francis Higgins, for his future welfare. "By his will," wrote Canon O'Hanlon in later days, "he requires a yearly mass to be celebrated by all priests in this church for the repose of his soul ; so that I have been praying for him once each year since I became attached to this parish, without knowing anything of his antecedents." It cannot be doubted that, had those antecedents been known to the charitable writer, he would but have redoubled the fervor of his orisons on behalf of a soul presumably so much the more in need of them ; but there is a tone about his statement which almost suggests a sense of injury in having been betrayed into interceding for an informer unawares.

Human nature, in the mass, remains the same, and there is little to add to Solomon's estimate of it. What has once been possible will remain the measure of possibility till the end of time. Greed and falsehood and perfidy may wear different forms from those in which they clothed themselves a hundred years ago, but they themselves are, alas, perennial growths in this poor garden of humanity ; and McNallys, Reynoldses, Higginses, and Magans are, we may be sure, plentiful enough among us, though time and opportunity may have altered the direction in which they turn their talents to account. To judge by deeds is but a crude method of valuation ; it is a matter of incalculably less importance whether or no a man has sent a comrade to the scaffold than whether he would on occasion be capable of the treason : and we shall do well, before we congratulate ourselves upon having left a vice behind us, to make sure that the root from which it sprang is not alive, and as ready as ever, under equally favorable conditions, to put forth fresh shoots.

I. A. TAYLOR.